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SUBJECT: ANTI-CORRUPTION CONFERENCE CALLS FOR QUALIFIED PUBLIC
SERVANTS AND STREAMLINED PROCEDURES

¶1. (U) Summary: President Karzai opened the National Anti-Corruption Conference December 15-17, 2009, before 250 attendees that included parliamentarians, academicians, media and diplomatic representatives. He invoked national pride to fight against the image of being one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Referring to daily accusations of corruption against government officials, he said whether the propaganda is right or wrong, it is the Afghan people's responsibility to stamp out corruption in Afghanistan. End Summary.

¶2. (U) President Karzai spoke at the opening session of the National Anti-Corruption Conference December 15, 2009. To the more than 250 attendees, including parliamentarians, academicians, media and diplomatic representatives in attendance, Karzai invoked national pride to fight against the image of being one of the most corrupt countries in the world. He called for realistic expectations of what can be accomplished, warning that corruption won't be eliminated in one day or one year. He said actions rather than slogans are needed for the fight. Karzai tasked the conference participants to discuss ideas, to exchange views with each other to develop realistic, practical measures to produce results in eliminating corruption.

Simplify bureaucracy to fight corruption

¶3. (U) Pointing to unnecessary bureaucracy as one of the sources of corruption, Karzai said simplifying government procedures and regulations would reduce bureaucracy which is a primary source of corruption. He used the example of the driver's license application process which requires 25 steps, each its own opportunity for corruption. Karzai suggested that streamlining procedures to require driver's license applicants visit only one office rather than many will not only simplify the process and improve efficiency but also reduce opportunities for corruption. Karzai cited the United Kingdom, India, and Singapore as examples of countries where unnecessary bureaucratic steps and the need for political connections for licensing or taxes have been eliminated.

Service for the public not personal gain

¶4. (SBU) Addressing public salaries, Karzai suggested that many Afghan government employees are getting rich in one or two years. With salaries on average of 100 USD per month, he said there should be no way they should have the means to travel abroad, buy property, a house, car or even a bicycle, and yet they do. Observing that even the President of Afghanistan could not afford to travel abroad without special government allowances, he disclosed that he had completed his asset declaration which indicated he had \$10,000 - \$15,000 USD in a German bank account. Karzai challenged ministers and deputies, even parliamentarians to disclose their assets and financing of their property. Anyone expecting to work in the Afghan government, he said, should do so to serve the people not to get rich. He indicated that money can be earned through business, but government employment should not be the source of personal gain.

Foreign Money Brings Foreign Influence

15. (U) Turning to foreign influence as another source of corruption, Karzai called for an end of foreigners "secretly" paying government employees and providing them with vehicles without informing the government. Without citing any actual examples, he did suggest that these payments weaken the government, leads to corruption and establishes a parallel government within the government. Declaring that there is only one source of power and administration, he called upon Afghanistan's foreign friends to end this problem. (Note: The United States and the international community fund salaries and supplements for Afghan government employees through a transparent, basket fund, but the President's statement do not appear to be asking that this support end.) Karzai called for a meritocracy to de-politicize the process of hiring and promoting employees in the Afghan government. He said that political affiliations should not matter, and the government's administration and civil service should be immune from political intervention. Afghan government hiring and promotion practices need to follow international norms and standards, because Afghan employees, including the president should be in the "service of all."

Avoid corrupting the anti-corruption fight

16. (U) As he turned to local politics, Karzai cautioned that the fight against corruption should not turn into corruption itself. Referring to Kabul Mayor Abdul Ahad Sahebi who was recently convicted of corruption and sentenced to four years in jail, then subsequently released pending his appeal, Karzai called him "clean," an honest person who may have been unjustly accused. He challenged the Attorney General's office to investigate whether the Mayor was

convicted upon false charges, but Karzai added, if the mayor was rightfully convicted, then he "should spend four years in jail." Karzai admitted that everyone in government has shortcomings, from the president to low-profile government employees, but the fight against corruption should not defame respectable individuals.

17. (U) Referring to government agencies charged with oversight and reform, he said they should be apolitical. He said the people should have the truth about the alleged fraud in the recent elections from a thorough investigation, regardless of how long it will take. The President concluded with the suggestion that the conference be an annual event to work out problems and "our future" together.

Rule of Law and Public Outreach

18. (SBU) The Attorney General and the Acting Supreme Court Chief Justice Bahuddin Baha reiterated Karzai's remarks. Baha reminded the audience that the rule of law governs Afghanistan and that the conference participants had an important role in developing ways to combat corruption. He advised law enforcement to abide by and implement court decisions. The Attorney General compared the fight against corruption to removing a wall between the people and the government, and that government offices, even his, need to communicate more with the public. To accomplish this, he established the AG's media unit to provide the public with information, helping them understand the legal process and reassure them of their safety and security.

Audience Reaction and Dissent

19. (SBU) The audience showed little enthusiasm for the President's address; lightly applauding the speech only three times during, including when he switched from Pashto to Dari. Some laughed when he said he was worth only \$10,000 - 15,000. Following Karzai, one of the Directors from the High Office of Oversight received resounding applause when he all but directly contradicted the President regarding Mayor of Kabul. (Comment: If freely expressing different opinions advances an exchange of ideas among conference participants, then the opening session moved anti-corruption efforts one step in the right direction. End

Comment.)

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